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RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 8978
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000696

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SUBJECT: ELECTION COMMISSION SECRETARY'S PREDICTIONS AND
PROMISES

REF: ISLAMABAD 670

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with the Election Commission Secretary February 15. In addition to predicting a strong showing by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, he commented on the relative strength of Pakistan's three main parties and their leaders. He thought turnout would be generally low, but that some key groups would likely support the PML-N. Dilshad also responded to the Ambassador's concerns regarding the accreditation of thousands of domestic observers, promising that thousands more would receive credentials in time. He insisted that the vote count would be transmitted up the chain from polling station presiding officers to ECP headquarters in a transparent manner. Plus, Dilshad added, the level of scrutiny by the media, international community and opposition political parties would minimize electoral tampering. End summary.

Political Predictions

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Election Commission (ECP) Secretary Kunwar Dilshad February 15. Dilshad offered the

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meeting to brief the Ambassador on the ECP's preparations for the February 18 general elections. Instead, Dilshad spent most of the time providing his analysis of how Pakistan's largest parties will fare.

¶3. (C) Dilshad praised Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Sharif's campaign as "impressive," adding that Punjabis now saw Sharif as "the only credible leader of the opposition," with the loss of Pakistan People's Party leader Benazir Bhutto. Of the 148 contested Punjabi seats in the National Assembly (there are 35 more seats reserved to the province for women), Dilshad predicted the PML-N could win upto 65 seats; the PPP could win upto 50; the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Q would come in third (no number given).

¶4. (C) Surprisingly, Dilshad doubted the PML-Q would win much more than 60 contested seats nationwide. He warned, however, that about 50 "independent" candidates were actually funded by the PML-Q and so should be added to the party's column. When asked if these "independents" would go with whichever party won the plurality, Dilshad was adamant that they would stay with their benefactor. Dilshad informed that winning

candidates, if not already identified with a particular party, have three days to inform the ECP with which party they will align.

¶15. (C) Asked about the PPP leadership that has come to the fore since the December 27 assassination of Bhutto, Dilshad considered co-Vice Chairman Makhdoom Amin Faheem as "thoughtful" and co-Vice Chairman Raza Gilani as a "powerful speaker," but co-Chairman (and Bhutto widower) Asif Zardari as "nice but not popular in Punjab." Even though the PPP "has no real leader," Dilshad concluded, it could count on a solid 25 percent of the Punjab vote, as well as about 50 percent of the Sindhi seats.

¶16. (C) The rest of the Sindhi seats in the National Assembly would mainly go to the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). And, the Pashtun-based Awami National Party (ANP) will align with the PML-N, Dilshad asserted.

Turnout

¶17. (C) Despite weighty issues and a heated contest, the fear of suicide attacks on election day (and Interior Ministry warnings of such), would depress voter turnout, according to Dilshad. He expected no more than 40 percent would come to the polls. (Note: Only 35 percent came out for the 1997 general elections, and 42 percent showed for the 2002 general elections.)

¶18. (C) Dilshad expected that young voters would be out in force. He guessed that they would mainly support opposition parties. Additionally, he felt the PML-N's chances were the best of the three competing parties because religious conservatives would support the PML-N (with Jamaat-e-Islami

ISLAMABAD 00000696 002 OF 002

boycotting the race) and the anti-Musharraf vote would also go to the party (with PPP's Benazir Bhutto gone).

Election Promises

¶19. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's recent letter to the Chief Election Commissioner about the (then) minuscule number of credentials issued to Pakistani domestic observers, Dilshad claimed that the ECP was "very surprised" that local district returning officers (DROs) were "creating hindrances." He noted that he had just ordered provincial election commissioners to issue credentials if DROs did not. (Note: It appears that around 11,000 domestic observers will get credentials in time.) Dilshad claimed that the problem remained in southern Punjab. Dilshad added that, actually, Bhutto insisted in the 1988 general elections that the judiciary take over the role of DROs.

¶10. (C) Dilshad promised that the presiding officer at each polling station would announce the results of that station's count. The district returning officer will then compile these numbers and send the sum of the votes to the ECP in Islamabad on election night. Copies of form 16 and 17, which together describe the support for each candidate, will, for the first time, be offered to those candidates, Dilshad further promised.

¶11. (C) Most "unofficial results," however, are not expected until February 19, Dilshad said, and the ECP will compile all these numbers before party agents on February 20. Dilshad expected that, as "unofficial results" are released, they would be posted on the ECP website. (Note: This is a project supported by USG-funded IFES.) The final official results are expected by February 26.

¶12. (C) Dilshad insisted that electoral rigging "would be difficult" because of all the local and international media attention, because of pressure from the U.S. and the rest of

the international community, and because of the threat of post-election violence by opposition parties.

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